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ABSTRACT

Development and implementation processes of the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) program, a teacher evaluation and support system in Connecticut, are described. Purposes of the BEST teacher induction program include facilitating the acquisition of effective teaching behaviors, supporting new teachers, and developing veteran teachers' leadership skills. Program implementation and design are based on collaboration among educators, administrators, and policy makers; decentralization; shared information; and accessibility. (8 references) (LMI)

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A Collaborative Model of Induction

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Regional Educational Services Concept
Through Unified Effort
Litchfield, Connecticut

Paper to be presented as part of symposium.
"Connecticut's Commitment to the Teaching Profession: A Focus on Induction" at the 1991 AERA Annual Meeting, Chicago.

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In the past decade, there has been an extraordinary and pervasive emphasis on defining and assessing educational excellence. School improvement became the most important topic of debate among state and federal policy makers and during this time we have experienced the greatest and most concentrated push for educational reform in the history of the United States (Doyle & Hartle, 1985).

State legislatures have been paramount in this formulation of educational policy. In the 1980's nearly every state in the United States passed legislation related to reform of public education. Additionally, a multitude of reports and documents have noted substantive problems with public schools, citing a need for "raising standards" (Conley & Bacharach, 1987; Darling-Hammond, 1985) and emphasizing teachers as a primary focus (Johnson, 1986; Johnson & Nelson, 1987).

The Connecticut State Legislature and Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) made a substantial commitment to educational reform in the 1980's and initiated many reforms related to enhancing student achievement through an upgrading of the teaching profession. Of particular note is the Education Enhancement Act, an omnibus bill passed in 1986. This legislation included a wide variety of initiatives focusing on teacher salary enhancement, five-year professional development plans, new plans for teacher evaluation and career incentives, teacher certification regulations, exemplary classroom projects, academic scholarships, a graduate student loan program, and teacher preparation. The Act provided more than 300 million dollars for educational improvements over a three year period.

The Beginning Educator Support and Training Program:

Under the Act, a comprehensive set of interrelated programs--the Connecticut Continuum--was designed to target each of the four phases of a teacher's career (CSDE, 1988): the decision to teach, preparation for teaching, induction into teaching and continued professional growth.

As a part of the focus on raising the standards for entry into the Connecticut public school teaching profession, the Act provided for the initiation of the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program. Under this two-pronged program, beginning teachers are required to demonstrate effective classroom performance in a formal assessment process and are assigned a mentor to assist them during the first year or two of teaching in Connecticut's public schools.

Our discussion here today focuses on the support component of the BEST Program.

Connecticut: A Small State with Big Ideas:

Connecticut's 35,000 public school teachers are employed in 169 school districts supported by six regional educational service centers (intermediate educational agencies). During the three years of piloting during 1986-87, 1987-88 and 1988-89 and first year of implementation in 1989-90, over 1400 teachers served as mentors in some seventy districts.

The thinking during the design stage was to nurture collaboration through a "small start" developmental in nature rather than "imposed from above". Advisory committees met regularly to design a program framework and guidelines.

The goals of the BEST induction program are to:

- enable beginning teachers to acquire a repertoire of effective teaching behaviors as defined by the Connecticut Teaching Competencies
- assist newcomers in making adjustments to teaching
- develop leadership of veteran teachers.

(Feldlaufer, Hofmann, & Schaefer, 1990)

The BEST Program was designed with recognition and use of experienced teachers' skills and knowledge in the preparation and induction of those entering the profession. Veteran teachers serve as professional role models by demonstrating the standards of teaching reflected by the Connecticut Teaching Competencies in their role as a mentor with a novice teacher.

The Connecticut Approach: Collaborative and Developmental:

In the initiation of many educational reforms, the Connecticut State Legislature has taken a decidedly different route than many state legislatures by allowing for significant local discretion, control and autonomy. Goldstone describes the approach: "The Connecticut process is based on historical factors as well as organizational theory which assume that development and 'ownership' of reforms at the local level is a prerequisite to successful implementation" (1987, p. 80).

From the earliest beginnings of the design of the BEST induction program, an attempt was made to build from the grassroots and shed the bureaucratic mantle--not a small task for a state-wide, legislated and mandated program. Utilizing a decentralized structure, via the regional

educational service centers, the intention was to bring the program alive at the local level.

Not only were early developers attentive to voices in the districts, they were voices in the districts. At all junctions, development task forces were comprised of a blend of school district, state department and service center personnel. And, most importantly, a high priority was put on direct representation of classroom teachers themselves. This was not going to be a "done to" program, but rather a "done by!" In fact, during the early years of development, such an emphasis was placed on "for and by teachers" that administrators--in particular, building principals--voiced some concern as they saw the mentoring support as a threat to their role and responsibility.

As we think back on the development of the BEST Program during these first years, the question surfaces: "Why has this program grown so readily with such enthusiasm and support as indicated by continued numbers of teachers coming forward to mentor novices?" In part, it certainly had to do with "the tenor of the times" and some knowledge and application of how change and collaboration work.

With the Heart of All the Parties in Mind:

In the mid-eighties, there was an explosion of innovative program initiatives emanating from the Connecticut State Department of Education. The horizon looked very bright and the landscape was filled with possibilities for positive educational change. Within this context of excitement, a perception of need for assistance to novice teachers entering the profession was created. A clear program purpose was delineated and, importantly, there was an understanding of the mutual interests that could

be served by such a program. The CSDE could make inroads into improvement in teacher standards by focusing on the teacher just entering the profession and would do this by crediting and utilizing the demonstrated skills of veteran teachers. Local districts' novice teachers would receive support by teachers selected locally and trained regionally through State Department funding.

In both the design and implementation of the program, key persons from the State Department, teachers' associations, educational service centers and school districts have been involved in the decision-making process. Through advisory committees and focus groups, roles and responsibilities were created and explicated. There are field staff personnel at each of the regional educational service centers and a district facilitator appointed in each school district by the local superintendent of schools.

Communication structures have been put into place to promote and facilitate exchange: quarterly regional district facilitators meetings and public forums held by State Department personnel at the regional educational service centers, advisory committees comprised of principals, district facilitators, and mentors at each of the regional service centers and local mentor recruitment and selection committees in each of the school districts. Open lines of communication are highlighted through statewide newsletters disseminated by the State Department and newsletters from the regional educational service center field staff.

The infrastructure is maintained through on-going meetings between regional field staff and State Department consultants, at least monthly, backed up by a system of fax machines, electronic mail systems and a statewide data base accessed by computer terminals at each of the service centers. Just as importantly, public relations and information access are

attended to constantly and carefully: the CSDE provides a plethora of mentor recruitment brochures and posters, and every "player" in the program has received program literature. There are Education Enhancement Act notebooks in every local district center office, a School Administrator's Handbook in every principal's office, a District Facilitator's Manual with every designated district facilitator in the state, and a Support Teacher manual in the hands of every mentor.

In the development and implementation of a program such as this, we have learned again and again: it is not just what you do, but how you do it that makes a difference. Early on--through collaborative advisory committees--program procedures, roles and responsibilities were clearly explicated with "the heart of all the parties in mind". As the program has moved from the developmental to the implementation stage, the motto of "teachers are the heart of the matter" has been hailed heartily. Actions speak louder than words, however, and with a priority placed on accessibility of State Department consultants and regional educational service center field staff, the program has enjoyed popular support and acceptance and continued growth and development. This is a win-win program with benefits to all constituents--the state, regional service centers, districts, and most importantly, individual teachers. A "people-to-people" program has prevailed through an emphasis on accessibility, innovation, and involvement.

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